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Emergency Center Express

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Okmulgee 911 system Beset by Criticism

By Susan Hylton, Staff Writer
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Some city officials say county policies are slowing emergency response times.

OKMULGEE -- As new city manager, Bob Baxter said he knew something was wrong when he learned it was best to call the Police and Fire departments directly instead of dialing 911.

At nearby Twin Hills Fire Department, the agency posts a tip on its Web site advising callers with an emergency to dial the seven-digit phone number to a dispatcher in Beggs.

The 911 system here -- operated by the Okmulgee County Criminal Justice Authority -- has been the subject of controversy for years.

So what's wrong?

Those in charge of the county-run system say nothing, and that they are in the process of purchasing new equipment to give them better capabilities.

City officials say the county's policies and procedures are a problem. They say an extra step in the way calls are handled results in more time on the phone and slower emergency response times.

"You're telling your story twice before your emergency services are rolling for help," Okmulgee Police Chief Joe Prentiss said.

In some cases, those calling 911 are transferred by the call center operator and have to repeat their story to each responding agency.

An Okmulgee man who was stabbed in the chest more than a year ago was transferred several times as he lay bleeding on his front porch. He explained that he had been stabbed and that he was bleeding profusely.



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The 911 operator placed him on hold and transferred him twice -- first to the ambulance service and then to the Police Department -- even though the call should have gone to the sheriff.

Prentiss said it was miraculous the caller maintained consciousness during the entire 5-1/2-minute call.

The city has asked the county to acquire equipment so information can be relayed simultaneously to all the necessary responders, Prentiss said.

County Commissioner and criminal justice authority Chairman James Connors said new equipment has been purchased that will provide that capability as well as new mapping equipment.

"We're trying to get it all operable in the next month or so," he said.

But Prentiss said that's not entirely accurate. Prentiss said the equipment is not intended for public safety use. It is something that a private industry might use.

"If we had the equipment, we wouldn't have to make all these calls separately -- the victim wouldn't have to remain conscious through a stab wound," said City Attorney Michael Vanderburg.

"These people are upset. They say, 'I've already told you what my problem is,' and, you know what they do then -- they hang up," Prentiss said.

Sometimes callers hang up because they're trying to help save someone's life.

That was the case in October 2006, when a man called 911 about a house fire with a child trapped inside.

The man was doing construction work next door. He made a quick call to the 911 operator and was not sure of the address. He then got off his cell phone to help the mother -- her hair aflame and two toddler boys in tow -- and frantically hoped to rescue her 4-year-old daughter.

Firefighters from the central fire station, only 13 blocks away, were the last to arrive. They finally found the home by following the smoke, Fire Chief Rick Mitchell said.

The Fire Department had been given the wrong address -- an address that didn't exist. But Mitchell said one wouldn't know that because the 911 center does not have adequate maps.

Firefighters arrived in 10 minutes, but it was too late. The 4-year-old, Graciella Tiger, died.

Prentiss said it was a very difficult day for emergency responders, who will never forget the child's body being carried out of the house and seeing the grief-stricken mother.



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While they will never know for sure whether a quicker response time would have made a difference, they say they have no comfort in knowing they did everything they could.

Prentiss said he doesn't care who operates the 911 system. He would just like it to be run properly.

Mitchell calls the 911 system an embarrassment.

"I'm just tired of being a redneck county," Mitchell said. "It's no good to buy an \$800,000 truck if I can't get the right address. We practically have to call and invite ourselves to a wreck."

Connors said he doesn't think the 911 system is inadequate.

"That's just their opinion. They're wrong," he said.

Connors said the city picked a few bad calls out of a thousand.

"There are human errors sometimes. Everybody makes mistakes," he said. "I still stand my ground. We run a good system and will continue to run it with them or without them."

"I was in the fire service myself for 25 years," Connors said. "They just want to handpick somebody they can control."

What Does This Mean For You?

How do those in charge know nothing is wrong? If there is nothing wrong, why are they getting new equipment? How do they know what equipment to purchase?

When issues surface regarding emergency response times, answers and solutions must be quick to follow. How many citizens in crisis are going to check a Web site for a number other than 911?

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